WHat a Man Can Releive

4. We Are Salt and Light to the World Matthew 5:13-16

September 11, 1966 - Dyer

" 18 - Bethany

Not long ago

Late one evening last week I turned on television at an hour when most people except insomniac ministers are asleep. I was looking for some late news but instead happened upon a discussion program sponsored by the Church Federation of Chicago. After I recovered from the shock absorbed surprise of seeing my friend Lou Schweppe in the moderator's chair, - who by the way preached to this congregation in 1963, and the irony that of this program was appearing at a time when anyone in their right mind was in bed, I was briefly captivated by the nature of what was being said. Mr. A rep. of the Ch. Fed. Schweppe was interviewing a minister, The Rev. Ben Richardson, who I learned had quit the parish monistry and divorced himself from the institutional church. He was not a bitter man, just forthright and absolute candid, and he was saying some very provocative and sometimes embarrasing things. He had quit the institutional church because, as he saw it, neither the church nor the vast majority of individual church members were the slightest bit interested in taking the New Testament seriously. He felt, and I don't think we can argue with him, that the New Testament is very clear in defining the role of the church in the world. He felt, and again he read correctly, that the New Testament clearly defines the ethical imperative incumbent on every Christian. His interpretation was that Jesus of Nazareth loved men, all men - enought to lay down his life for them. He noted that the themes of love, service and sacrifice completely dominate the New Testament: that time after time, in parable after parable, in the letters of Paul and Pastoral Epistles, The New Testament is proclaiming that Christian men are called to be loving, serving and sacrificig men. Mr. Richardson simply could not see this happening within the church or in the lives of individual Christians because of their church memebrship

To be sure, he saw it happening: he saw men loving and serving and sacrificing and some even dying on behalf of other men: but these people were affiliated with the Department of Public Welfare, or hospital employees

or Peace Corps volunteers, poverty workers, members of the NAACP: not particularly Christians: not in any way related to the ongoing program of any church. He noted that the church has been and is involved in some of these things, at least in name, but he struck home by pointing out the great gap between what a denomination does with its mission money and how the people in the pew feel about it. He illustrated his argument by noting the recent dismissal of a prominent clergyman who had merely suggested in a sermon that "open housing in suburbia is a vital Christian concern, and that the Christmas fashion show - to which the women of his congregation were giving their minds, bodies, time and money was not.

Enough for Mr. Richardson. He quit and I disagree with him for that because I happen to beleive the church of Jesus Christ, regardless of how petty and shallow it becomes, is still the vehicle through which God acts and speaks in the world. I wish he had not quit because the church needs him and his thinking. The church needs the witness of men like him: men who are willing to be publically honest about the church and the NEW Test.

Of course, in saying this I am lining up behind Mr. Richardson, saying that the church generally, ~~and that includes us~~, is not ~~frequently~~ always willing to do the things the New Testament so obviously would have it do. I am saying that Christians by the millions are simply unwilling to be the kind of men and women Jesus Christ has so obviously called them to be.

The particular problem I am addressing ~~is a serious and profound one involving~~ involves much more that the reluctance of ~~the~~ the contemporary churchman to be honest about the real social thrust of his faith. The real problem has to do with a slowly evolving shift in emphasis: a moving away from the startign point in Galilea, and an arrival at a point quite distant and different. Stated as simply as possible the problem is this -

Jesus Christ called men to be a certain kind of men: if you will he called them into a new community, a relationship with him and each other that would in fact make them new men. He called them to trust him and

them go out into the world and be loving, serving and sacrificing men. This he told them was the very nature of the Kingdom of God. Becauseof what they would be, the Kingdom would be present whereever they went doing these things. Through them the world would know that something new was happening: their lives would herald the Good News that in Jesus Christ the Kingdom of God had been established on earth. That is the starting point, and now the shift.

The Church today calls men to it, not to be or do anything. It calls men rather, to join: to fill a pew, to give money, to participate in programs but notto be anything in particular. It asks them to join on the basis of intellectual assent: it says we believet this and this and this. If you agree with this and this andthis you are qualified to be a member - so jump on board.

In the beginning men beleived in Jesus Christ by being a certain kind of men. Today, men can beleive in Jesus Christ by giving casual assent to a list of theological assertions and being absolutley nothing. Of course, this new Christianity is more comfortable: to be a part of the church today doesn't have to make any difference in the way a man thinks and lives. It certainly doesn't usually prompt him to any great acts of sacrificial love. In fact, we make it as easy as possible. There is a sinful note of pride running through the church establishment in America that says in effect: "We're not different: you don't have to be a thing to be a part of us."

And every now and then there is a prophet like Ben Richardson, cast in the mold of Amos and Micah: a man who shines the spotlight of truth on our blatant hypocriey: a man who has the courage to measure the distance between the beginning point in Galilea and the contemporary church.

It is unfortunate that this is necessary, for it seems to me that our attention is called to the problem by the New Testament itself. Listen again to verses 13-16 of the fifth chapter of Maathew:

"You are the salt of the earth: but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltness berestored? It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men. Yoiu are the light of the world. A city set oin a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to your father who is in heaven."

It is important to note that these words were spoken by our Lord quite early in his ministry - it is. These words were spoken to the disciples long before the crucifixion and the resurrection - long before they had any opportunity to formulate a working Christian theology. Notice also, that these words, part of the Serm on the Mount were addressed directly to the disciples. Not to the great crowd that had followed Jesus up the hill, but to the specific twelve men men he had called to discipleship. Finally, notice that the form of this passage is declarative and not exhortative. He did not say: "Gentlemen, I genuinely wish you would become the salt of the earth and the light of the world. I beg you to do this for me." Rather he declared, in a kingly manner: "You ARE the salt of the eart and the light of the world." He had taken the initiative in the first place by calling them. They had not volunteered for discipleship, - he called them to it. And now he was "ordaining"them, if you will: bestwoing on them the office of being salt and light. They had little to say about it. The only option open to them was to be good or bad salt, bright or hidden light.

I have the feeling they knew immediatley the kind of life he was calling them to. Few element s were more important to them and their county men than salt. Salt was valuable enought to be taxed by Rome, and a quick glance at any Biblical Dictionary will show that its uses were many and varied. It was the only effective preservative:-thismade it absolutley

essential to the common welfare. It was used as an additive to food - but only by the very wealthy.
The tenple priests used a saline solution to cleanse new-born infants and at other points in the sacred ritual ~~of the temple~~. When it losts its savorm salt was, in fact, used in road building to provide a hard and porous surface.

The importance of light need not even be explained except to say that the image of light is used frequnelyy in both the Old and New Testaments to indicate thw Divine coming into the darkness of human history.

Salt and light have many things in common: both are essential to life: both were extremely important in the first century. Both salt and light are active energies that are good only when they are applied. Salt is of little value by itself. It becomes truly salt when it is applied to food or to a wound or whatever. Light, by itself, is nothing but the absence of darkness. It becomes something useful only when it is illuminating an object: ~~causing changes in the environment to make visual perception possible or more pleasing.~~ Both salt and light cause changes whereever they are brought into play: they are active energies that change whatever they touch. Simply - salt and light are worthless unless they are acting like salt and light.

One final observation, and this may be the most important of all for us. The disciples were callled salt and light apart fromm anything they had done and before they beleived in Jesus Christ in any intellectual sense. This was before Peter had proclaimed, ina moment of revelation : "You are the Christm the Son of the Living God." As I mentioned earlier this occurred long before the crucicifion and resurerection. It is fair to say that the disciples couldn't possibly have artículated a sound Christolg at this point because they didn't know who he was. They found themselves being used - in a stance of radical discipleship without much more thatt a conviction that he was right and good: a deep loyalty to himas a person.

pause

Now, what does all of this say to us today, as we begin to think about ~~the~~ what the church ought to be & our role as Christians

Now, what does this say to the church of Jesus Christ in 1966, and to you and me as individual Christians? (*) It says first that the total reasonfof being of the church is not to sell a particular set of ideas about God: it is not to go out and comvince people to join an institution: it is simply to be the church: to be the kind of radical community that acts in and on its environment like salt and light. This is the crisis then for the church today has eloquently proven its unwillingness to be this kind of community. It doesn't want to be the promoter of change in any shape or form. It doesn't want to get its hands dirty in the stuff of life. It sees no relationship between itself and the way people order themselves politically. It absolutley refuses to feel personally and profoindly responsible for the slum - the victim of prejudice - even the lonely and depressed among its own number. It is an instiution that has found the formula to success xxxxx in staying as far away as possible from the social and personal ethics of the New Testament, an instituiton that therefore spends far too much of its time and energy and money adorning itself and far to little doing the work essential to its being the church. Simultaeneously it finds itself in a world that refuses to take it very seriously: a world that is weary of piuos talk and demands pious lives. Increasingly it is like salt that has lost its savor: like a beautiful bright light hid under a bushel.

Clearly the need is great for much rethinking and retooling in the church, and a good starting point for us today is to ask: "in what way are we acting like the salt of the earth and the light of the world?" To ask that question in integrity is to acknowledge that the church is only the church when it is loving, serving, sacrificing and dying if need be on behalf of men.
To merely ask the question is to acknowledge that the word "mission" is not that benevolent work to which we give whatever money is left over after we've paid all the bills, but instead the very reason there is a church and we are part of it.

To ask that question is to acknowledge that the corporate attention of the church must always and forever be directed outward to those who need to be loved and served and sacrificed for..

The title of this sermon is itself a declaration: We are "salt and light to the world." This I beleive. You and I are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. We are here: we are part of the church of Jesus Christ - for reasons as varying and unsound as were Peter's and John's and Andrew's at that point. More than likely we were raised in the church; perhaps we like the people or enjoy the sermons: maybe it's just a habit with us. Nevertheless we are here and the declaration of Christ applies directly to us. He makes us salt and light to the world. We are not called to be theologians: I don't think it matters, in any ultimate sense, whether or not we can articulate our personal beleifs regarding providence. In fact, if we are honest, everyone of us will admit to doubt: to points of theological disagreement or non comprehension. But we are here and the call of Jesus Christ is to a total life of being loving, serving sacrificing disciples.

Like the disciples I beleive you and I have had nothing to say about our being salt and light: the only deciding left for us is what kind of salt and light will we be. The burden of decision is here left on every person who finds himself in the church of Jesus Christ. I have one life to live: what kind of life will it be. Jesus Christ has placed a claim on me: he has told me I am the salt of the earth and the light of the world: but will I be like active, effective salt: will I be like that bright light on a stand illuminating all in the house? It is no easy decision: the life of commitment is no easy life; to be like active salt and bright light is to be willing to do difficult things: to make great sacrifices: to give of oneself completely: to live a life through which the redeeming love of God is at work in the world.